Q: I write a lot of letters, memos, and e-mails and they're getting longer and taking more time to write, while my available time is getting more squeezed. Can I cut words without losing the meaning of the message? -- Jack B.

A: Absolutely -- and this is a critical skill today, because the amount of information we're sharing is growing enormously each day. Trouble is, our educational culture sometimes focuses on writing for quantity, not quality.

Here's what good writers do to cut extra words.

Hunt which's; kill be's

Unnecessary words are like fat in food: they don't nourish ideas. Hunt for which's. "Which" clauses often pack a sentence with too many ideas. Solution? Replace a which with a period, and make two or more sentences:

Instead of: Production quota reductions, which go into effect this week, have been made economically feasible by substantial reduction in operating expenses. (19 words)

Write: Starting this week, we're cutting production quotas. Why? Because we cut expenses. (12 words)

Next, try to replace any form of the verb "to be" -- be, is, are, was, were, been, being, am -- with a stronger, more lively verb. "Be" verbs are weak, and often cause you to add words you don't need. They also often encourage wordy and weak passive voice. Like leeches, "be" verbs hang on to other verbs and make writing impersonal.

Instead of: It is urgently recommended that every effort be made by the writer to make sure that the passive voice is changed to the active voice so that his or her writing can be more easily understood by the reader. (37 words)

Use: Change passive verbs to active so your reader can understand you more easily." (13 words)

Instead of: Receipt of your letter is acknowledged and appreciated.
Use: Thanks for your letter.

Cut the fluff

Some words or phrases we commonly use are really excess. You can cut them without any loss of meaning and write short, lean prose.

Instead of these phrases: In view of the fact that, a large number of, through the medium of, in the event that, for the purpose of, in order to, in view of...

Use: Because, many, by, if, to, since

Use nouns over verbs

When you can, turn nouns into verbs; focus on action:

Instead of: Altercation, remuneration, development, fortification, preparation

Use: Dispute, pay, develop, fortify, prepare

Use simple words

We express the most important ideas in our lives in one-syllable words: God, love, birth, death, health, joy, sex, warmth, peace, cash, food, drink. So:

Instead of: Abbreviate, demonstrate, facilitate, optimum, approximately

Use: Shorten, show, help, best, about

Combine ideas

Instead of: The manager's report was carefully illustrated, and it covered five pages.

Use: The manager's carefully illustrated, five-page report ...

Instead of: Installation testing, which is offered to all of our customers at no further cost whatsoever, is available with each system through purchase from this company.

Use: We offer free installation testing to all of our customers for each system they buy from us.

Positive, not negative

Instead of: If the error does not involve data correction, the special function key should not be used.
Use: Use the special function key to correct data.

Now, test yourself:

Improve these sentences by cutting unneeded words.

A. The degree of importance in the level of accuracy depends upon the particular situation.

B. The fact that the recruit had not succeeded was brought to my attention recently.

C. The reason why we failed to reply is that we were not apprised of the fact until yesterday that somehow the report had been unavoidably delayed by engineering.

Answers:

A. The level of accuracy depends on the situation.

B. I recently learned that the recruit failed.

C. We didn't reply because we didn't know until yesterday that engineering had unavoidably delayed the report.